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Response Paper, *The House of Mirth*

Like a prize show dog, Lily Bart was born and bred to be someone – something – very specific. She must perform for the judges of society and make calculated movements seem effortless and appeasing. In this task, she succeeds magnificently: she is charming, manipulative, and beautiful, and she knows it. Unfortunately, her specialized design proves to be her downfall. Bart is so entrenched in her ways that she cannot keep up with and adapt to her environment’s demands.

Throughout the first book of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Bart is constantly described by both narration and the characters in a way that is less than a full person, but with more awareness than a simple object. Specifically, everyone around her, even Lawrence Selden (who is arguably a true, sympathetic friend and her best match), comments on her as a specimen or a child – a being capable of some action, but only within defined parameters of a study or playroom. These assessments of Bart ring truer than comparisons to ordinary possessions like Percy Gryce’s Americana; a book will not preen itself, nor will it fail in its primary function should it be kept on an ordinary shelf by an ordinary reader. Bart, on the other hand, is seen and sees herself as someone to be looked upon. Selden says early on “how highly specialized she was,” and Bart is constantly setting herself up to be observed because it is her job, her function (5). In true Darwinian fashion, this seems to come to her as easily as breathing, such as when she stops to sit by a bend in the road (“a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted”) and she is greatly disheartened and thinks it a “failure” for her to have been unobserved (54). A silky show dog such as Bart is raised from birth to strike a pose and be admired, and is truly put out when unnoticed. A book is not.

Like a Chihuahua in the Alps, Bart can make her way with the skills she has for a while. She can meander along, feeling secure in her abilities as she trips into Gryce on the train or comes to Gus Trenor about her troubles “with the trustfulness of a child,” while thinking herself “a clever girl” (16, 75) for playing him so. But when she indulges herself in true childishness, honestly acting with the youthfulness her contemporaries claim to want and expect of her, the snow quickly crumbles beneath her and she must scramble to the surface, often by relying on others (13, 70). She knows how to obtain rescue through her manipulations and carefully laid plans – e.g. “land” Gryce, borrow money – but each time she is pulled from the snow, she is soon bounding after an impulse – e.g. meeting with Selden, buying more dresses when paying her debts (76) – her lesson learnt in mind but not in practice. It is more important to her and her pride that she maintain an image, specifically the pretty ones she is so accustomed to. Indeed, Lily Bart’s situation is more tragic for her awareness and more maddening for her refusal or inability to act in according to that awareness.

When Selden tells her about the “republic of spirit,” he says “…there are sign-posts – but one has to know how to read them,” and Bart shouts back that she has known how, but only ever ponders the signs when he is around (60). This shows she is capable of action, even escape; she knows the steps, but it is not part of her design to read these signs and take these risks. She was raised so much a trained animal, and so she behaves the part, carrying on in vain and vanity until the ground gives way, forcing a test of adaptation or extinction. Tragically, she tells us herself “there was no one…to tell me…” (60) and she is unprepared for the terrain she lands herself in.